



Good Dad



St

## Talking to Office XP

October 1, 2002  
By [M. David Stone](#)

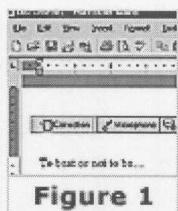
Among the most intriguing new features in Microsoft Office XP is speech recognition (available in the English (U.S.), Japanese, and Simplified Chinese versions of Office) and the companion text-to-speech feature that installs with it. If you aren't a proficient typist, the idea of being able to dictate into Word probably sounds like the ideal way to get your words down. But even if you can't imagine talking to your computer to compose a report, you may find speech recognition useful if you're dashing off a quick e-mail or taking notes while working on something that's keeping your hands busy. And if you use Excel, letting text-to-speech help with proofreading is very handy.

### Getting Started

#### RELATED LINKS

- ▶ [Product Guide: Office Suites](#)

First, make sure your system meets the minimum requirements, which vary depending on your operating system. To check, choose Help | Microsoft Word Help, then the Answer Wizard tab, and search for speech. Choose the topic About speech recognition, and open the section Speech recognition requirements. If you're connected to the Web, be sure to choose the link labeled operating system specific requirements, as well.



**Figure 1**

In addition to matching the system requirements, you'll need a microphone. If you simply want to see the feature and aren't concerned with how well the speech recognition works, any microphone will do. But if you want to actually use the facility, it's worth spending the time and money to get a high-quality microphone mounted on a headset. An appropriate headset can cost from about \$40 to over \$100, with more expensive headsets generally offering better audio quality.

ENLARGE

By default, Office installs without speech recognition. To install the facility from Word, choose Tools | Speech, and then follow the instructions. The installation routine will also install the Excel text-to-speech feature.

To learn the basics, browse through the rest of the speech topics in Help—this is one Help file that is truly useful. In particular, be sure to read Use speech recognition, which explains how to do things like switch between Dictation mode and Voice Command mode. Also look at Things you can do and say with speech recognition, especially the section Using Dictation Mode, which lists commands for inserting punctuation marks, starting a new paragraph, and so on. To insert a period, for example, you can say "dot" or "period." To insert a left curly brace, you can say "open brace," "curly brace," or "left brace."

### Make It Better

The first time you use speech recognition, Word will walk you through the steps for adjusting your microphone and creating a speech profile, which is how you train the software for the way you speak. The setup routine also shows how to position the microphone. For best results, the microphone needs to be in the same position every time you put the headset on.

Once you've set up speech recognition, you'll see the Language bar ([Figure 1](#)). This toolbar will show up when you're working within a program in any context that can take advantage of the feature. A nice surprise is that the toolbar shows up not just with Office programs, but with Outlook Express and Internet Explorer as well. The downside is that the Language bar is free-floating, which means it often gets in the way. When you need to move it, you can click on its left edge and drag it, but you can also modify the toolbar to make it easier to

live with. Right-click anywhere on the toolbar and you'll open a drop-down list of options.

The language bar has five buttons, each of which has a text label, by default. Correction fixes recognition errors, Microphone toggles the microphone on and off, Dictation and Voice Command switch between the two modes, and Tools opens a menu that lets you, for example, do additional training (highly recommended).

Once you're familiar with the buttons, you can turn off the text and shrink the toolbar by right-clicking anywhere on the toolbar to open its context menu and unchecking the Text Labels menu item. You'll also find a down-pointing arrow on the far right side of the Language bar that opens a drop-down list you can use to remove buttons—or add them again.

Even better, you can get rid of the toolbar and still have all the commands near at hand. Right-click on the toolbar and make sure there's a check next to Additional icons in taskbar, then choose Minimize. The Language bar will disappear, to be replaced by icons in the system tray. The two you care about represent the Language bar itself—which shows as the letters EN for the English (U.S.) version—and a Microphone icon.

The system-tray microphone icon works just like the Microphone button in the Language bar. There's no equivalent to the Dictation and Voice Command buttons, but you can toggle between the two modes by voice. Say "voice command" to switch from dictation mode to voice command mode. Say "dictation" to switch back to dictation mode.

As a substitute for the Language bar's Correction button, switch to voice command, select the word or phrase to correct using the keyboard, the mouse, or a voice command (say "select last word" or "select next word" as many times as necessary to select a phrase), then say "correct" to see the correction list. Alternatively, after selecting the word or phrase, right-click on the selection (or press Shift-F10) and choose from the partial list of corrections in the context menu, or choose More to see the full list. If you need to resurrect the Language bar—to use the Tools button for example—just click the language bar icon in the system tray and then click Show the Language bar.

You can also get rid of the Language bar completely by right-clicking on it and choosing Close the Language bar. If you do that, you'll see a message telling you that you have to go through Control Panel to get the bar back, but you can also get it back by choosing Tools | Speech.

If you're using an earlier version of Office, you can add speech recognition with other programs, notably IBM's ViaVoice (we looked at ViaVoice for Windows Pro USB Edition 9.0) or Lernout & Hauspie's Dragon NaturallySpeaking (we looked at NaturallySpeaking 6). You might even prefer one of these programs to the built-in feature in Office XP. Both are designed to integrate with Office, both work with other programs as well, and both are more sophisticated in some ways than the feature in Office.

One welcome difference is that instead of being limited to a floating toolbar, both programs default to using a taskbar that docks at the top of the screen and otherwise stays out of the way. Another important difference is that they don't have separate dictation and voice command modes. Say, "Put the file in the file cabinet," to either program and the phrase gets entered as text. Say "Open a file," and either program will open the Open dialog box. When you look at prices, keep in mind that both programs come with appropriate headsets, which you'll have to buy anyway to use the built-in feature.

Speech recognition is by turns useful and fun (sometimes hilarious), and exasperating. You can minimize the latter state by taking the time to play with the various options and especially by going through extra training sessions.

### Reading Out Loud

One of the best ways to proofread text or numbers is to have one person read the information aloud while another checks against the original. Now you don't need someone else's help to do this—your computer can read the information back to you, using the handy text-to-speech feature (which works only in Excel).

To use text-to-speech, choose Tools | Speech | Show Text to Speech Toolbar. There are five buttons on the toolbar. Speak Cells reads the text in all currently selected cells. Stop Speaking stops the reading. By Rows

makes the software read cells across, and By Columns makes the software read vertically. Speak on Enter tells the program to read the contents of each cell after you press Enter. You may find that this is the easiest way to proofread—as you enter data in each cell.

Not so incidentally, make sure the microphone is turned off on the Language bar when you use text-to-speech, or the computer may interpret the words it's saying. Finally, note that if you go to the Language bar and choose Tools | Options, then the Text To Speech tab, you can change the voice to use and adjust the reading speed.

Copyright (c) 2003 Ziff Davis Media Inc. All Rights Reserved.